



King County

Civil Rights Commission

2009 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Essay Contest

"The Dream Marches On"

Sofia Smith – First Place

Lake Washington Girls Middle School

"We have also come to the hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism." —Martin Luther King Jr.

This quote from Martin Luther King is from 46 years ago, but is still relevant today. America is not hearing these words and is instead doing the reverse of what Dr. King advocated. America is cooling off and taking the tranquilizing drug of "gradualism." In today's society, racist comments are not seen as a severe threat. Because of this, racism is slowly creeping back into our culture and being accepted. America now needs to take serious steps to shine a critical light on the accepted racism in America and keep Dr. King's dream marching on. When students learn about him now, Martin Luther King is just a symbol that many don't truly understand. While America is going through a recession, racism is not the first priority that American activists focus on. In fact, the economy makes people forget about the damage of racism to our society. Therefore, in the younger generation, racist comments are not seen as taboo, but something funny.

Students learn about Martin Luther King Jr., but most do not see what impact he actually had on the United States of America. Now, he is just a symbol of some distant history. When I was younger, I participated in MLK Day activities and did not truly understand the huge impact he had on my current life. I am mixed race and when I was younger I had no idea how lucky I was to have an equal opportunity with the white kids in my class. As a small child, I marched down Rainer Avenue South in MLK Parades, I sang songs about him, I did portraits of Dr. King, but none of that resonated with me. Like many of my classmates, I was not aware of Martin Luther King's ideals, such as

equality between races and the fight against poverty. Therefore, I did not understand the very real dangers of racism. Instead of merely celebrating Dr. King as a symbol, we must connect his dream with the value and behaviors we live by today to ensure racism is truly obliterated.

While America is going through a recession, racism is not a first for priority American activists and civic leaders. Even in the very liberal area where I live, Seattle, I've noticed a spike in the racist comments I hear daily. With the collective focus on the economic crisis, racism has taken a back seat and is now flaring up in teens and young adults. I even see it in myself. I observe myself joking with racism - playing with it. While it seemed funny, when I reflect, I don't even want to repeat the words I said because I realize that even I am an example of how this insidious laid back view of racism can creep into my behavior and seem acceptable. Now more than ever before, America as a nation needs to foster the spirit of respect and equality articulated in Martin Luther King's dream to save the younger generation from returning to simple-minded and unconscious racist behavior.

In the younger generation, racist comments are not seen as a serious issue anymore but something funny. In teens and young adults, when people say racist things, it's common to laugh it off, or say "I was only joking," instead of taking seriously the danger of the meaning behind the comment, and the suffering those words will cause in the future if America does not change. The most popular stars on YouTube are the ones who swear and make a joke out of racism. My friends and I watch these things and think they're funny. Kids in America see that and learn what they should say

to make people laugh. The message those YouTubers are giving is that racism can be a funny joke and that jokes are a way to make racism acceptable in society; we must call attention to this slippery slope and to the quick paced downward spiral away from Martin Luther King's dream.

"And another reason that I'm happy to live in this period is that we have been forced to a point where we're going to have to grapple with the problems that men have been trying to grapple with through history, but the demands didn't force them to do it. Survival demands that we grapple with them. Men, for years now, have been talking about war and peace. But now, no longer can they just talk about it." —Martin Luther King.

In this essay, I highlight the urgency of this issue and the need to obliterate the now-accepted racism in America to keep Martin Luther King's dream marching on. When students learn about him in the future, I hope that Martin Luther King is more than a misunderstood icon. Rather, I hope that kids in the future understand the large imprint he had on the equality and rights for all citizens today. While America is going through a recession, racism should continue to be a focus of concern in our country. It needs to be emphasized especially with the younger generation where racism is becoming the new fad. As Americans who believe in Martin Luther King's dream, we need to draw awareness to the racism that still runs rampant in our society.

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